

# USAID/Afghanistan Regional Legal Office

# Afghan Etiquettes and General Facts



For Use of Foreigners Working in  
Afghanistan

# General Information

- **Name:** Afghanistan
- **Location:** Asia
- **Government:** Islamic Republic
- **Language:** Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 50%, Pashtu (official) 35%, Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11%, 30 minor languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4%.
- **Major Religion:** Sunni Muslim 80%, Shi'a Muslim 19%, other 1%.
- **Major Ethic Groups:** Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Harare 9%, Uzbek 9%, Aimaq 4%, Turkmen 3%, Baloch 2%, other 4%.

- **Area: total:** 647,500 sq km  
*land:* 647,500 sq km  
*water:* 0 sq km
- **Land boundaries: total:** 5,529 km
- **border countries:** China 76 km, Iran 936 km, Pakistan 2,430 km, Tajikistan 1,206 km, Turkmenistan 744 km, Uzbekistan 137 km
- **Population:** 33,609,937 (July 2009 est.)
- **Administrative divisions:** 34 provinces
- **Independence:** 19 August 1919 from UK

- **Constitution:** new constitution drafted 14 December 2003-4 January 2004; signed 16 January 2004; ratified 26 January 2004
- **Currency (code):** Afghani (AFA)

# Greeting

Greetings are very important and usually consist of a lengthy exchange of questions regarding your health, the well-being of your family and general pleasantries. Asking someone a direct question without going through the greeting questions first, is usually considered very rude.

When meeting someone the handshake is the most common form of greeting. You will also see people place their hands over their hearts and nod slightly.

# Men Greeting Men

Men usually shake hands when greeting one another during an initial meeting as well as in formal situations. Hugging and backslapping are common greetings among friends and family members. Some may exchange kisses on the cheek.



# Women Greeting Women

Women generally kiss each other, starting with the left cheek and then switching to the right cheek. Some will kiss one cheek, but most kiss two or four or even up to 8 times (alternating cheeks). A handshake is common for initial meetings.

# Greetings between Men and Women

Women and Men will not shake hands. However, if initiated by woman there is no problem. It generally not acceptable for women to be touched or touch men.

# Mixing Between Genders

- Free mixing between genders only takes place within families and close relatives.
- In professional situations such as at business or universities, males and females may be co-workers, but are nevertheless cautious to maintain each other's honor.
- If a man speaks to a woman directly in a social context (not in the office), he is dishonoring her. If a man speaks to a women on the street, this is also equally inappropriate.

- On the other hand, foreign men should note that it is inappropriate to initiate social conversation with as Afghan woman, and a foreign man should not ask an Afghan man about his wife or female relatives.
- Unless married, men and women should never touch one another under any circumstances.

- If you happen to take photo of a female Afghan, seek permission before you do so.

# Business Cards

- BCs are not widely used in Afghanistan.
- If you are given a BC, take it respectfully and study it so that they see that you are spending time considering their credentials.
- Use your right hand for exchanging BC.

- It is good to have your BC translated into Dari or Pashtu.

# Official Meeting

- Business meetings do not usually begin on time, however it is a good idea for a foreigner to be punctual.
- Small talk almost always precedes any formal conversations. It's appropriate to inquire about one's health, families, etc before the meeting starts.
- If the meeting involves a group of people it will be led by a person who will se the agenda, the content. Honor and shame should always be considered. Always express yourself in a way that in not direct or pins blame on someone. Never make accusations or speak down to anyone.



- It is not appropriate to pass gas or blow your nose in front of Afghans. If you must blow your nose, leave the table.
- Do not sleep or doze off in meeting or public, if you are jet lagged, give an apology.
- The "get to the point" mentality is usually seen as rude. Setting a friendly mood will get you a lot further than trying to be direct about anything.

- Interruptions are quite common and agendas tend to be followed loosely if at all. It's best to remain patient and follow along.

# What to Wear

- Men should wear proper suits and shoes.
- Women should always dress up modestly and conservatively and should have headscarf while meeting with officials or walking in public.

# Gift Giving

- Never offer alcoholic drinks. However, if you know from first hand experience that the receiver drinks you may do so but covertly to avoid shame.
- The first time you go to someone's house, it is optional to bring a small gift (desserts or pastries).
- When bringing a gift, be subtle in how it is given. Do not immediately give the present but rather discreetly place it near the door or where you sit down.

- Gifts are usually wrapped nicely and presented in a subtle manner. Green is good for weddings.

# Religion

- Islam is practiced by the majority/all of Afghans and governs much of their personal, political, economic and legal lives.
- Among certain obligation for Muslims are to pray give (5) times a day – At morning, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening.

- Supervisors/managers are recommended to release their Afghan staff during the time of pray.

- During the holy month of Ramadan (one month each year) all Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk. Fasting includes no eating, drinking, cigarette smoking, or gum chewing.
- Foreigners are advised to do their best to avoid eating or drinking in front of Afghans (Optional) but is excellent to do so. And should not do so in public.



- During this month, Afghans usually work six (6) hours daily (There is no restriction by religion if they work more or less)

- Afghans are sensitive about their religion, speaking to them negatively about their religion makes them unhappy.

# Do

- Most of Afghan employees perform the noon and the afternoon prayers in the office; they should be allowed time to do so.
- In many occasions – but not all – male and female are served and eat separately. If you want to eat food there, consider this please.

- DO shake hands with your Afghan colleagues when arriving and leaving business discussions. Should an Afghan place their right hand over their heart after shaking hands, it is appropriate to reciprocate this gesture. When greeting a female colleague however, you should always wait for her to initiate the handshake.

- DO dress suitably and in a conservative manner. This is especially important for women meeting with officials, must wear modest clothing that covers the arms and legs in particular. A headscarf is also advisable.

# Do Not

- Please do not eat and drink in public during the month of Ramadan. (morning till evening).
- Culturally it is not acceptable to shake hands with Afghan female employee if not initiated by themselves. It is ok for a female to initiate a handshake with another female.

- Do not touch Afghan females under any circumstances. Is it ok for female to touch a female.
- Culturally it is not polite to pass gas or blow nose in front of Afghans.
- Do not walk in front of someone while he/she is praying.

- Do not use curse words in conversation with Afghans.
- Avoid unnecessary touch



- Make sure that meeting schedules (with Afghan government senior officials) do not touch prayer times.
- DON'T correct or criticize your Afghan associates in front of other business colleagues, as this may cause embarrassment and harm the individual's sense of honor.

- DON'T inquire too much about a male colleague's wife or female relatives during initial business introductions. To a traditional Afghan male, this is not considered a topic for public conversation but rather a private matter and as such could be taken offensively.

- DON'T be surprised if during business conversation your Afghan counterpart stands closer to you than usually acceptable. An Afghan's sense of personal space is less compared to most westerners.

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